Civil Society Strengthening in Africa

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1. A Brief Literature Review of Civil Society

1.1. A popular "narrative:" the third sector

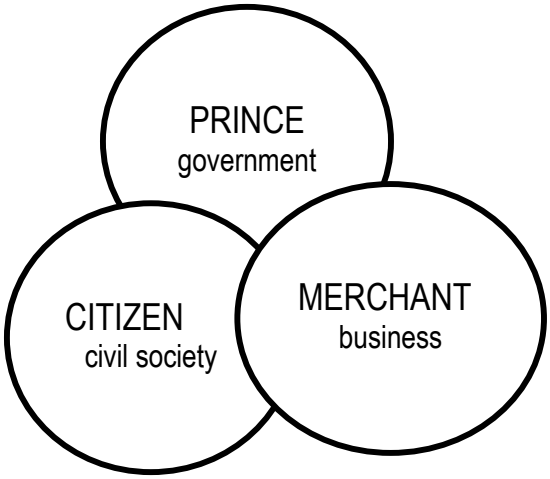
Coinciding with the end of the Cold War, civil society has emerged as an important conceptual framework for academics, donors, and development practitioners. They argue that the complex quest for sustainable development drives agencies to find "broad explanatory narratives that can be operationalized into standard approaches with widespread application" (Roe 1991). The civil society narrative focuses on that part of society that connects individual citizens with the public realm and the state:

> *"Governments and market are not enough to make a civilization. There also must be a healthy, robust civil sector: a space in which the bonds of community can flourish. Government and market are similar to two legs of a three-legged stool. Without the third leg of civil society, the stool is not stable and cannot provide support." (Bradley quoted in "Beyond Prince and Merchant)*

A common conceptualization of society is a tri-polar model, consisting of the government, the market, and the citizenry. The most well-known description of this model is found in Marc Nerfin's book, "The Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen" (Nerfin 1984). Some have referred to these as the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The third is also referred to as the "not-for-profit" sector, the "non-governmental sector," or simply as "civil society."

Within this tri-polar model, the "public sector," or the state, rules and governs. It establishes the environment in which all of society functions. Governments mobilize state resources through the power of the law, by coercion and threat, and by command. The "business sector" provides goods and services and is driven by the desire to make a profit. It mobilizes resources through trade and exchange.

Major functions ascribed to the "third sector" include holding the other two sectors accountable to the citizens, enabling citizens to associate around common interests and concerns, and improve the lives of the citizens. The resources of this sector are citizens' own time, energy, and personal resources -- or the time, energy, and resources they can persuade others to grant through financial gifts and other forms of support. The resources are mobilized through shared values with other citizens and by a shared commitment to action based on those values.



The above diagram is one way of illustrating civil society, using Nerfin's prince, merchant, and citizen. The civil society sector has also been defined as:

> *"the plethora of private, nonprofit, and non-governmental organizations that have emerged in recent decades in virtually every corner of the world to provide vehicles through which citizens can exercise individual initiative in the private pursuit of public purposes." (Salamon and Anheier 1997)*

1.2. Historical roots of civil society

In spite of its current popularity as a development narrative, civil society is not a new concept and has long historical roots. Goran Hyden, a political scientist with a keen interest in Africa, traces these roots through four "schools" of thought, each identified with a preeminent theorist (Hyden 1997).

The *"associational school"* is the most dominate in most current discussions. It emphasizes the importance of autonomous and active associations, which are seen as both a counter-balance to state power and as an incubating training ground for democratic practices. Through voluntary associations, citizens actively take the initiative to solve problems and pursue common interests and goals. The associational school is a particularly cherished perspective in the United States where there is a long historical tradition of organizations formed around common concerns and goals. These range from athletic clubs, church trustees, and local school boards to advocacy groups promoting special interests. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote extensively on the virtues of voluntary associations and intermediate public organizations in his famous nineteenth century treatise, "Democracy in America."

Related to the associational school are those who are concerned with constitutional law and its importance in providing an enabling environment for civil society. Hyden refers to John Locke as a preeminent theorist in this regard and labels such an approach as the *"regime school."*

Others have given priority to the role of economics in the development of civil society. Thomas Payne insisted upon the necessity of structural reforms to strengthen private property, which would then contribute to a vibrant civil society. Hyden sees manifestations of this perspective in the structural adjustment programs currently being promoted by the World Bank, along with their growing interest in civil society. He refers to this a *"neo-liberal school"* of thought.

Also within an economic vein are theorists of a *"post-marxist school,"* like [first name] Gramsci, who reject overly romantic notions of civil society. They point out that far from rendering a spontaneous sharing of values, the rise of civil society also carries within it a potential clash of conflicting interests between groups.

Echoes of these historical roots and theoretical arguments can be seen in today's discussions on civil society. Contemporary views can be categorized into three distinctly different conceptual frameworks or analytic models (Bothwell 1997). Some focus on the ***results*** of civil society while others focus on the ***pre-conditions*** required to produce a vibrant civil society. Most are primarily concerned with the ***composition*** of civil society. While not narrowing the discussion to a single definition, these categories do help clarify operational understandings.

1.3. Focusing on the "RESULTS" of civil society

Desired results, or ultimate ends, are one lens through which people view a strong civil society. They focus on particular behaviors they believe a healthy civil society produces. Citizens have a tremendous potential to organize to achieve shared objectives. Such potential, however, is often unrealized when citizens are treated as objects of control by the state or as consumers by the market. Civil society embodies the realization of this potential.

Civil society is that "sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of community association, and networks of public communication." (Bratton 1997). Norms of civic community may include trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion. Structures of associational life are voluntary in nature and range from local, informal associations, to national and international political advocacy groups. Networks of public communication comprise both print and electronic media, including faxes and e-mail.

Bratton describes how civil society and civil society organizations are organized and the results they presumably produce, but does not say what civil society organizations actually do. The focus is on trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion, as well as peaceful dialogue, transparency, flexibility, and listening. These results and the networks of civic engagement add to a society's *"social capital" and the values and norms* associated with it. The more social capital a society has, the more efficient its transactions and the more productive it is presumed to be.

Social capital has been defined in a CARE internal discussion paper as "*the quantity and quality of social resources (networks, membership in groups, social relationships, access*

to wider institutions in society) upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods. The quality of these networks is determined by the level of trust and shared norms that exist among the network members. People use these networks to reduce risk, to access services, protect themselves from deprivation, and to acquire information to lower transaction costs. (Frankenberger and Garrett 1998)

It follows that social capital is a productive resource, just like physical, financial or human capital. Machinery and buildings are physical capital that firms can use to produce goods or a household can use to achieve livelihood security. Cash or loans provide the financial capital needed to finance production or household income strategies. Investments in education, health and people strengthen an individual's ability to participate in and manage these productive processes to achieve his or her objectives. People use social relationships to acquire and utilize all of these capitals more effectively and also engage in a range of activities to achieve their objectives more efficiently.

Robert Putnam written about the connection between organized associations and the role of social capital within civil society. One of his most famous works is a longitudinal study of government effectiveness in Italy (Putnam 1993). He was particular interested to learn why things work so much better in Northern Italy than in Southern Italy. After studying twenty different regions, he concluded that the vibrancy of associational life is the key determining factor. These conclusions were reiterated in his later essay "Bowling Alone," in which he uses the demise of organized bowling leagues [in the US] as a metaphor for the loss of potential social capital and the shared norms and trust that accompany it.

There is skepticism, of course, about the assumption that positive communal values naturally emerge from organized associations. [first name] Gramsci in particular has highlighted the conflicts that different associations often have with each other [citation]. Skeptics point to the fact that football hooligans are organized, build trust within their community, and reinforce shared values among themselves, but that this does not produce positive societal norms. The same is true for skinhead associations, extremist political parties, and some ethnic associations. The Mafia is one of the most carefully constructed "associations" in the world, but few would want to include it in a serious discussion about civil society. To deal with such contradictions, some simply add the desired values to their definition of civil society. The makers of the following definition have obviously wrestled with this theoretical problem:

> *Civil Society is the network of groups which are organized volitionally (that is, out of their free will) to peacefully pursue a common interest, advocate a common cause, or express a common passion, respecting the rights of others to do the same and maintaining their relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state, the church, the firm, and the family. (Social Development Papers #24, World Bank, 1998)*

It is no coincidence that the re-emergence of civil society as a major conceptual framework occurred in the late 1980s, when mass **movements for change** through broad political action were being undertaken by ordinary citizens. Examples are the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, organizing of anti-

apartheid action in South Africa, Tiananmen Square in China, People Power in the Philippines, and the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya. Change as an end or "result" is motivating particular interest in civil society.

With the end of the Cold War, donors began to push **good governance** in their policy agendas. (Clayton 1996). Initially their approach was to put pressure on authoritarian and corrupt regimes to reform. Aid was given on the condition that human rights would be respected, multi-party elections would be held, and state bureaucracies reformed. However, these conditions were inconsistently applied and enforced; in addition, there was increasing recognition that a transition to a democratically elected government did not, in itself, guarantee a more democratic culture.

This realization helped turn attention to civil society as a necessary foundation of a democratic society. The popular "tri-polar" model suggested that organizations existing outside of the state and market could provide a counter-balance to both the state and the market. The assumption was a strong civil society would demand a more democratically accountable and transparent state, and lead to good governance. The task of those wishing to support reform, therefore, has been to identify which organizations are likely to play a key role and what forms of support can be directed towards them in order to strengthen their capacity to participate in a vigorous civil society.

Yet another result of a strong civil society is improvement in the ***provision of basic services***. In Europe and America, this has long been found in institutions such as non-profit hospitals. As structural adjustment programs are implemented and bureaucracies reduced in developing countries, education and health are often hard hit. Non-government organizations (NGO) can fill the gaps. Some cynics suggest that this is the true motivation behind the World Bank's support of civil society. Others argue that NGOs provide the services more efficiently and effectively, which has largely been behind donors' growing interest in supporting NGOs (Edwards and Hulme 1995). A strong civil society is seen as a key ingredient for extending basic social services to the poor.

1.4. Focusing on the "PRE-CONDITIONS" of civil society

The ***pre-conditions*** that must be met before a healthy civil society can come about might include freedom of speech, freedom of association, general rule of law, absence of political violence or war, and effective capable government. Others have suggested freedom of religion, absence of tribal/ethnic/racial violence or war, multi-party politics, substantial literacy, lack of famine, a sizable middle-class, and a healthy, participatory political culture. Citizen action to seek these conditions may be crucial; citizen buy-in certainly is. However, these preconditions are primarily secured by the state and the economy. Rights-based advocacy groups typically approach civil society in a similar manner, giving human rights highest priority.

Much of the literature on civil society comes out of the European and American experiences. The following is a list of factors that have shaped European civil society (Jørgensen 1996):

The idea of civility, meaning, among other things, listening to the opinions of others no matter how wrong-headed, adhering to a common standard of behavior, and protection from severe punishment for holding and expressing opposing views.

Literacy, printing, and the press. The establishment of common "print language" served to bind nations together and made possible a "public sphere" of writers and readers. It is hard to imagine a non-literate civil society except at the grassroots level.

Nationhood and national government. Despite some adverse effects, nationalism helped to establish a manageable "sphere" to which the individual can relate. It has helped to secure the idea of a "national government" that performs certain duties and is responsible to the people who have established rights.

Some measure of economic freedom enabling a private economy sector . The private sector showed the possibility of organized activities outside the state and made possible the development of civil society by favoring economic independence, social mobility, organization, education, and communication.

Democratic institutions and civil rights, not least freedom of expression and of association. Under pressure, the absolutist monarchies gave way to more democratic forms of government, gradually involving larger and larger parts of the population. Public participation in politics, once an absurdity, now appears as a natural occurrence.

Equal rights for women. Until comparatively recently, women were excluded from most forms of participation in civil society, and they still are in many countries. Women's gains are indicative both of the strength and weakness of civil society: strength, because women's struggle for equality has been fought and won in the area of civil society; weakness, because civil society was, and is, subject to the same discriminatory practices as society as a whole.

Voluntary organizations. There has been a tremendous growth of civil society organizations in modern Europe. Many of the most important and most appropriate are "value-based organizations." The importance of voluntary organizations is of great importance to the formation of civil society, and therefore society as a whole.

Using the European and American experience as an example may give rise to criticism that "civil society" is a transplant of Northern values that are being imposed on the developing nations of the South. Hyden's four preeminent civil society theorists--Locke, Payne, de Tocqueville, and Gramsci--aggravate the skepticism. Critics point out that many of the pre-conditions assumed about civil society simply do not exist in numerous developing countries (Trivedy and Acharya 1996).

Colonial powers often deliberately divided the societies they ruled by supporting a small group of urbanized elite, who were educated, controlled by written code of law, and allowed some carefully constrained, independent political organization (Mamdani 1996). Once independence came, this elite minority remained in power, in spite of the fact that it did not represent the vast majority of the population. Even today, in many African nations rural areas remain outside of the formal codified structure. For instance, hereditary Zambian chiefs control communal lands, decide who can live and farm where, and sit as supreme judges for civil complaints, all guided by traditional customary law. The sense of nationhood is often very weak. as is any sense of unifying citizenship among the population as a whole. Instead, people's sense of identify and belonging are rooted in combinations of ethnicity, religion, class, or other factors. This is clearly manifest in situations like Somalia.

> *Externally imposed forms of 'civicness' -- in the form of legally incorporated or formally registered associations and organizations, western norms of behavior, written constitutions, and rigidly divided institutional relations -- overlay pre-existing indigenous ways of associating and relating which are often familial in the broad sense of the term, non-formal in the legal sense, and highly resilient. These types of civicness interact with each other in complex, and situation-specific ways, forming a dualistic reality which is not consistent with how the West appreciates civil society. In its turn, this means that the international aid system does not see or cannot value informal expressions of civic association, and because it does not appreciate them, thinks that they either do not exist or up to no good. (Fowler, 1996).*

Such traditional, indigenous forms are rarely accountable or transparent, at least within a Western understanding of the terms. Yet despite the potential for exploitation, these social structures are resilient enough to support informal survival strategies during extremely harsh times. This leads to a major dilemma for those who wish to assist the poor by promoting civil society. It forces a reconsideration of many pre-conditions that are often simply assumed in civil society discussions.

1.5. Focusing on the "COMPOSTION" of civil society

While most who write about civil society agree that it falls somewhere in the realm between the individual and the state, there is wide disagreement about who is part of civil society and who is not.

> *Most commentators exclude the family, tribe, and clan from civil society, as the connections between people within these groupings are hereditary and not transactions between strangers. Many exclude commercial, for-profit activities and business interest associations from civil society because for-profit motivations supersede the "public good" impulses. Many also exclude political parties from civil society, especially political parties of the ruling government, because they are a critical part of the governing state. However, prominent academics disagree with each of these propositions. There is also considerable debate whether to include or exclude groups which exhibit "uncivil" behavior, such as*

extremist political and religious groups. Most, however, agree the following are a part of civil society:

- *religious organizations, churches, mosques, temples*
- *social clubs*
- *social movements*
- *community based organizations (CBOs)*
- *private schools and colleges*
- *free press and independent media*
- *consumer associations*
- *labor unions*
- *professional associations*
- *non-governmental organizations (NGOs) not otherwise identified above (Bothwell 1997).*

The composition perspective of civil society is clear with the emphasis many donor agencies are giving to supporting NGOs with a proclaimed purpose of addressing development needs. In the United States, these are often referred to as "private voluntary organizations" (PVOs). For many years, NGOs were virtually synonymous with the large international NGOs, like CARE, but there has been an explosion of local and national NGOs during the past ten to fifteen years (see the Egyptian case study). This is not surprising since many donors are pumping huge amounts of money into supporting local NGOs. USAID has made this a priority in three of the four countries featured in the case studies included in this report, Egypt, Mali, and Somalia, while giving them significant attention in Zambia.

The World Bank has also prioritized strengthening of national intermediary NGOs as a way of developing stronger safety nets during periods of structural adjustment. As head of the "Civil Society Thematic Team," Michael Edwards has been working on practical tools for creating an enabling environment though policy work at the national level and identification of best practices and approaches for building capacities of NGOs (Edwards 1998).

Some donors use the terms "NGO" and "civil society" interchangeably. For donors and agencies like USAID and the World Bank, the main strategy for strengthening civil society is to promote, encourage, and build the capacities of southern NGOs. Two organizations see this as their primary mission: INTRAC (International Non-governmental Organization Training and Research Centre), based in Oxford, and PACT (Private Agencies Collaborating Together), based in Washington, D.C.

NGOs have become such a dominant aspect of civil society discussions, that careful consideration needs to be given to understanding what they are. The term "NGO" is vague and institutional mapping is a way to begin analyzing and clarifying strategies for action (Holloway 1997; Fowler 1996). The World Bank's "Thematic Group" is also working on annotated typology maps of civil society (Edwards 1998). Though typologies vary, a common distinction is often made between mutual, public, and private benefit NGOs.

Mutual benefit organizations are formed to benefit its members. These organizations include cooperatives, trade unions, and professional associations. They are often national in scope, but are made up of many local organizations. Churches, for example, can be included in this category.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are perhaps the most familiar type of mutual benefit organizations found in a development context. Although there are many indigenous structures (e.g., *kire* and *eder* burial societies in Ethiopia), most are less formal, like joint work parties, which are organized at the village level to cultivate land for a common purpose or to deal with common problems, such as a broken bridge. However, most CBOs have been introduced from the outside, i.e., stimulated by outsiders and endorsed to different degrees by local people. The hope is that introduced organizations will be accepted, absorbed and mainstreamed into peoples' lives so that they indeed become indigenous.

The promotion of community-based organizations for development purposes is very common worldwide. It is often linked to the desire for beneficiary participation, so that those who benefit from development programs take on a large measure of responsibility for the program. The difficulty is frequently that the benefits are dependent on outside resources and the organization only lasts as long as the resources flow. The case study in Mali refers to these as "CARE orphans." Outside resources may also occasion internal strife in the community as people jostle to get access to the resources.

It is important to note that "mutual benefit organizations" -- cooperatives, professional associations, CBOs, etc -- are in principle formed by and accountable to its members. If members do not like what the organization is doing, they are able to change it. The beneficiaries of the organization are the same as those responsible for the governance of the organization. This is an important distinction from "public benefit organizations."

Public benefit organizations are set up to be useful to others, and their mission is based on common perceptions and values of self-selected citizens who are assumed to be public spirited. Those who govern the organization are accountable to their governance structure, not to those who benefit from their services. They may act in the interests of certain groups in society, but do not necessarily have a mandate be their representatives.

Public benefit organizations include philanthropic organizations, civic organizations (similar to The League of Women Voters), advocacy groups, and welfare and development NGOs, both local and international. They are attracting such considerable attention by donors, especially national organizations in developing countries. Yet issues about accountability and legitimacy have led at least one major donor, DFID, to acknowledge their concerns.

> *'"Civil society" is used to describe the broad range of organisations in society which fall outside government and which are not primarily motivated by profit. The include voluntary associations, women's groups, trade unions, community groups, chambers of commerce, farming and housing cooperatives, religious or tribal-based groups, cultural groups, sports associations, academic and research*

institutions, consumer groups, and so on. "NGO" is used to describe the specific category of voluntary and not-for-profit organisation which is set up as an intermediary to improve the conditions of poor people in the South. Although some argue that NGOs are not civil society organisations, because they are not membership based organisations, for the purposes of this paper they are treated as a part of civil society.' From DFID Consultation Paper on Strengthening Support for Civil Society, May 1998

This hesitation about the role of NGOs in civil society has led to many to distinguish a third type of NGO, ***private benefit organizations***. These are often seen as charlatans and pretenders, their motives fiercely questioned by some "genuine" public benefit organizations who feel their own reputations are being compromised and damaged by "counterfeits." Such entities, it is argued, are simply fronts for the activities of individuals who create positions to secure salaries from what is perceived as abundant and easy money from international donors seeking to support civil society organizations. Similar suspicions are cast on other "briefcase NGOs" as being fronts for either the government or market sectors.

It is difficult to sort out the motivations of others; most would agree that everyone is driven by a host of mixed and often contradictory motives. The controversy surrounding "private benefit organizations," however, reveals the passion with which some want to include or exclude particular entities from the rolls of civil society. From a "composition" perspective, where an organization is placed on institutional maps is important because of the funding implications.

The way in which one views civil society, be it through the lens of desired results, pre-conditions, or composition, is an analytic issue concerned with definitions and operational understandings. Clarity is important because it affects the formation and selection of particular strategies for engaging and strengthening civil society.

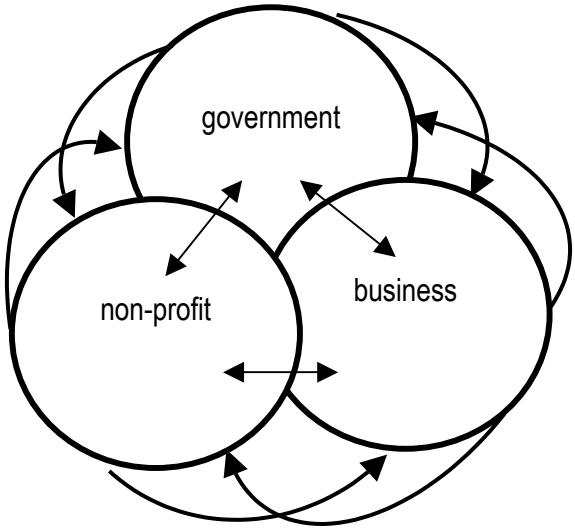
1.6. A holistic view of civil society: dynamic relationships

Many of the analytic models reviewed above force an artificial compartmentalization of key civil society players and often pits one against another. The hostility of some NGOs toward others with suspect motives is one example, as are confrontations of some civil society organizations against the state. Yet various players also interact creatively and actively depend upon one another. Funding to NGOs often comes from government and private business. A broader view of civil society may therefore be helpful.

Lester Salamon of the Center for Civil Society Studies at John Hopkins University has done extensive research into non-profit organizations, be they advocacy groups, service providers, or personal interest groups. He defines "non-profit" as simply the "private pursuit of public purposes," though non distribution of dividends and/or earnings and governance procedures are also obviously pertinent. Much of his work as been on how non-profits are funded and their social functions.

"Of late, this term (i.e., 'civil society') has been used to depict a particular class of social institutions, a class that lies outside both the market and the state. The rationale for this has been the argument that this set of institutions, in all its diversity of interest groups, savings associations, church choirs, sports clubs, charities, and philanthropic foundations, is uniquely engaged in creating the networks of civic engagement that produce and enforce communal values and notions of trust so necessary for cooperation and civil life.

"While there is validity to this line of argument, however, it has the unfortunate effect of relegating the other sectors to the status of being 'uncivil.' More importantly, it overlooks the extent to which the 'civil society sector' relies on the other sectors to survive. Indeed, it might be argued that a true 'civil society' is not one where one or the other of these sectors is in the ascendance, but rather one in which there are three more or less distinct sectors -- government, business, and nonprofit -- that nevertheless find ways to work together in responding to public needs. So conceived, the term 'civil society' would not apply to a particular sector, but to a ***relationship*** *among the sectors, one in which a high level of cooperation and mutual support prevailed." (Salamon and Anheier 1997)*

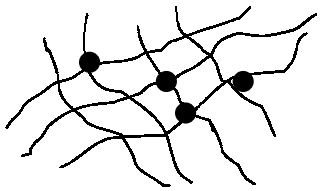


Civil society as the dynamic relationship between government, business, and the non-for-profit sectors

This diagram alters the classic tri-polar model by creating a more encompassing understanding about civil society. Rather than focusing on particular results, pre-conditions, or criteria of composition, viewing civil society as a dynamic relationship allows a fuller appreciation of real life interactions between organized social players. This involves both supporting and limiting factors (like promotion and encouragement on one hand and accountability on the other). Such a dynamic view also acknowledges that all of these social players are continually changing and that there is movement between and within the major sectors. Rather than meeting some established criteria of whether

one is a "civil society" organization or not (or is "really" a business or a quasi-governmental body), the central issue becomes one of the contribution that can be made, from whatever vantage point, to the promotion of civil society.

A dynamic view of civil society serves to provide a more helpful ***operational understanding*** about civil society and avoids strategies with either/or choices, e.g., a focus primarily on advocacy for particular interests *OR* strengthening particular types of organizations *OR* aims to improve service delivery, etc. Within a dynamic relationship, however, a strategy to strengthen civil society implies an examination of the total picture; key points of engagement are seen in the light of the whole. A helpful image is that of different threads being woven together to form a holistic fabric of civil society.



The weaving of a strategy, therefore, focuses on the intersection of important themes in the context of particular countries. The inclusiveness of the all the analytical models and conceptual frameworks provide an overview for deciding a combination of activities that potentially reinforce one another. Such an image lends itself more easily to pluralistic "both/and" choices rather than confining "either/or" decisions.